



## Newark Day Center

*formerly Newark Female Charitable Society*

43 Hill Street, Newark, New Jersey 07102

### THE NEWARK DAY CENTER: An Old Tree Bearing New Fruit

There's something almost miraculous about the way some organizations live longer than their founders, and continue to grow new shoots and bear new fruit long after their early years. Fruit trees wear out in time and have to be replaced, but joint efforts by men and women are capable of continuous renewal and indefinite harvests. Such a work is the Newark Day Center, heir to a hundred and seventy-five years of good labors — her roots go back to before Newark became a city, and yet she remains young in spirit, hale and hardy in her work among the city's poverty-ensnared people. Some of the details of her work have changed. People don't dress the same. They have automobiles instead of horses, and the farmers no longer provide most of the employment in town. Still, human needs haven't changed all that much. A kind face and a kind hand mean as much as they ever did. And Newark still has its generous business people, and its open doors for the poor. None seems as open as the Newark Day Center.

It was back in 1803, during the administration of President Thomas Jefferson, that a handful of distinguished ladies of Newark gathered in the parlor of Rachel Boudinot, wife of the judge and patriot, Elisha Boudinot, to discuss what could be done about the poor. Newark was then a town of some 4,000 people, many of whom no doubt still remembered the events of the Revolution, the tragic deaths from the British raids and the final victories. General Washington himself had been to dinner at the Nathaniel Camp's in Newark, and that family treasured the chair in which he had sat. The Boudinot's had entertained the Marquis de Lafayette when he visited the town. But, whoever of importance or of fame had crossed their thresholds, it was clear that Newark's leaders were not forgetting the widows and orphans in town. On that night of January 31, about the time Jefferson was negotiating for the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon, the ladies of the Boudinot, the Camp and other families were negotiating "to devise some means for caring for the poor and distressed persons in the village." Discussions quickly ended, and the work began, under the title of the Newark Female Charitable Society.

What had prompted the call to arms, on behalf of the poor, by some of the most comfortably situated women in a town then renowned for its prosperity? These ladies were of the aristocracy of the town, in fact. Weren't they jealous of their leisure, and of the needs of their large families? What, then, could have been the impetus behind the Society's foundation? Simply, it was the call of their faith. From the pulpit of Old First Presbyterian Church had come the plea, "Your neighbor is suffering, therefore devise some means to assist," and no sooner was the cry up, than four officers, six managers, and one hundred subscribers (each donating at least a dollar a year — worth much more in those days) were looking after their suffering neighbors.

The plan of the Charitable Society seems almost too simple, but it worked. Money was only rarely given: necessities, such as food and clothing, were given in emergencies. As far as possible, employment was found for a widow, sewing or the like. Materials were provided, lessons given if need be; and a woman could support herself from her home labor. The ladies of the Society greatly feared what they called "habits of dependency", and so they encouraged learning new skills. Most of their charges were women who had never supported themselves, and couldn't easily find work in an age which often made it impossible for women to work.

So as not to give an impression that the ladies were stern taskmasters, here is a quote from the records of the Society, about the officers and managers: "It was the custom of the sisters to pass their leisure time, even when visiting or receiving friends, in sewing or knitting for the needy, and in advance of the season making clothing of woolen materials in summer and cotton in winter, so as to be prepared for all emergencies." Their care for their neighbors was not the more distant kind of charity more common today. It was tailored to the kind of society their organization had to function in.

The long years of the 19th Century saw Newark grow into one of the major industrial centers of the United States. Even by the Civil War, conditions had changed completely. Since a clearly stated case is worth a dozen generalities, we quote from Miss Sidney Paul Gill's annual report of 1864. She was then Secretary of the Society.

"The army and the varied necessities for it, have opened avenues for self-support alike to men and women. Of the injustice done to the latter by the grinding avarice of contractors and sub-contractors who pile up wealth from the Government, while they dole out to the poor needle-woman such a pittance for her pay, as wears out health and heart in earning half a livelihood, it is not fitting, perhaps, that we should speak; for few know so well, as do our visiting managers, what a low and pitiful cry of oppression rises up daily to Heaven from hundreds of such victims in our midst. One case in point may be cited, that of the wife of a highly respected member of the 33rd New Jersey Regiment, who lost his life by the sinking of a too heavily laden pontoon boat in crossing the Potomac. Under the depression of this great bereavement, the widow is struggling to support herself and three little children by finishing off soldiers' pantaloons made by machine. Rising before day and laboring industriously till dark, she is able to earn but two dollars a week. Out of this is to come rent, food, fuel and clothing for four. The thing is impossible. The women's health is failing, and she is frequently obliged to apply to the Society for aid. She will eventually find relief in the receipt of the Government pension. But delays are inevitable . . ."

The Fresh Air work of the Society did not begin until 1882. The original founders could never have considered such an idea, since Newark in 1803 had plenty of fresh air — there being few industries and many acres under cultivation. When the flood of immigrants from troubled Europe hit Newark, the factories swelled to enormous size, and airless tenements crowded all the vacant space. The Female Charitable Society adapted itself to the changing times, and seeing a need, it stepped in to fulfill it. In the records of the Society, the origin of the Fresh Air work is described:

"One early spring day in 1882, a feeble old man was sitting outside of his doorway. He was a poor paralytic German, who with his wife occupied one room on the ground floor of the rear extension of a tenement house in one of the back streets of Newark. The yard upon which his weary eyes gazed was devoid of grass or any sort of greenery; tomato cans were strewed about, and a runlet of dirty wash-water meandered down one side. The air he breathed was laden with evil odors, and the sunshine and blue sky were the only fresh things in his environment; and yet this same old man was the origin of all the Fresh Air work of the Charitable Society. For, as he sat there, one of the Managers of the Society exclaimed: 'O, Mr. H\_\_\_\_\_, wouldn't it be nice if you could get to the country!' From that day, haunted by the memory of this feeble, cripple patient, making the most of the very unfresh air that Newark provides for the poor, she began to ask, 'Why can't we have a Fresh Air Fund as they do in New York?' Being but a newly a Manager and greatly in awe of the assembled Board, she asked this question first at her District Meeting, from whence it was promptly brought before the Board. Nothing more was necessary; The Fresh Air Committee was organized then and there, with full authority and an appropriation of two hundred dollars."

Around the turn of the century, changes came thick and fast, as Newark became a great center of industry and commerce, and its wards became the first American home of countless immigrants. In 1908, a laundry was opened, to provide instructions and employment for needy women. A hearty meal was given to the workers at dinner time, courtesy of the Society, with the help of local tradesmen, giving a ham, or a roastbeef platter. With their pay, the women could escape their extreme situation. A sewing school was begun for children, on Saturdays. Cooking was taught, management of a kitchen garden, the proper way to serve at table, so girls might escape pressing poverty by work as maids. The Crazy Jane Society, an Auxiliary of the main Society, still carried on the work of bringing bundles of flax to women in their homes, which was spun into shoe threads and sold for a livelihood. A Day Nursery and Kindergarten was begun in those days, so widows might take advantage of the job opportunities then opening up for women.

In 1910, the Society opened up a Boy's Club, to change the habits of thought and teach independence to boys who had learned all their attitudes on the streets. A Tired Working Women's home, Woodrest, was opened about the time of the First World War. The war brought a call to the Society for help in making surgical dressings, which call was dutifully answered by the ladies. As the state took over certain functions, the Society dropped certain interests. The Public Schools began to teach Home Economics, and so the cooking classes were dropped. It was in 1932 that the Federal Government finally passed a law granting to persons 65 and older monthly cash grants, when they had no other support. Such government programs made it possible, by 1937, to

discontinue the Grocery Department which was begun with the heavy immigration. By 1946, the Society's Relief and Welfare Department provided food wherever needed.

The Newark Day Center is the latest stage of evolution of the original Charitable Society, and its work reflects the needs of our time. It is difficult for a woman to stay home, watch children, and bring in work enough to support herself. The days of spinning enough flax into shoe-strings by hand are over. Who can compete against the machines? The only hope for a woman caught in poverty, anxious to raise herself and her family out of her situation, is to find what work she can outside the home, and find care for her children during working hours. This is one specialty of the Day Center: toddlers, pre-schoolers, kindergarteners, and early school age children (before and after school) are cared for while mothers become breadwinners. But that is not all — the Center also provides emergency care for Essex County children, under three years of age, who may be abandoned, abused, or neglected. With our growing sensitivity to the problems of our elderly people on fixed incomes tailored to pre-inflation days, the Center has also opened its doors to Seniors, providing a community center for their needs — with crafts, education classes, hot meals, and an important information and referral service. In conjunction with gathering Seniors under their roof, educating and feeding them, the Center's Geriatric Health Service is providing for their dental, medical, and other health needs.

Surely, the women of 1803 would be pleasantly surprised by the changes over the long years. The snowball they started rolling in the age of Jefferson has grown larger, and changed shape in the age of Carter. Even the women of 1903 would have a time figuring it all out. Their Society has outlived one of its benefactors, the *Newark Evening News*, which formerly carried word of the cases and donations for the Fresh Air Fund. Now, with the closing down of the *News*, the *Star-Ledger* has stepped into the breach. However times have changed, Newarkers of 1803 and 1903 would recognize the mission as the same: to lift up the hearts of the neglected, to bring them into a healthier, happier, less depressing life, by whatever means can be found at hand. Lives have been saved in the past by the old tree planted a hundred and seventy-five years ago, and with the continuing help of our citizens, many more will continue to be saved.

An account of the Society and the Center would be incomplete without some applause for the many people over the years who gave of their substance for the good labors. From the wealthiest of the Ballantine family to the simplest living maid, people have given. Churches have held concerts and donated the proceeds. Harvest Home Festivals and Charity Balls have been held. In 1830, an anonymous party gave a warm winter cloak so that a widow might attend church through the bitter weather. In 1856, a Mr. Shipman gave fifty tons of coal and a few coal stoves for distribution among the poor. A great work like Newark Day Center lives, solely, because there continues to be people who, when they see a need, will do what they can to fill that need. So long as there are such people, the widow, the orphan, the distressed, the neglected will have little to fear.

Joseph Ricciardi  
Historian